



Upper Basin States Lead with Real Solutions for Post-2026 Colorado River Operations

Guided by Real Water, Real Cuts, Real People and Real Action, Upper Basin States lay out core principles for a fair and sustainable Post-2026 Framework at CRWUA

LAS VEGAS — Dec. 16, 2025 — The Upper Colorado River Commission ([UCRC](#)) is spotlighting the Upper Basin States' approach to sustainable management of the Colorado River at this year's Colorado River Water Users Association (CRWUA) conference.

Guided by [Real Water](#), [Real Cuts](#), [Real People](#) and [Real Action](#), the Upper Basin has long managed the River within its limits, making tough, science-based decisions while supporting all users, including Tribal Nations. Committed to a fair, sustainable framework that protects the River, the Upper Basin has set a clear path for post-2026 negotiations based on reality, drawing on decades of experience to guide these principles into action.

Real Water: The Upper Basin's water realities are defined by strict regulation of water use based on available supplies. Snowpack, runoff and hydrology set the physical limits for use, while implementing advancements in measurement and instrumentation are aimed at ensuring accurate accounting of Upper Basin use. Every drop matters, and managing within these constraints is essential to long-term sustainability. Real Water core principles include:

- **Planning for the River we have, not the River we want**
Operations must reflect today's hydrology and climate science. Solutions should be grounded in actual water supply, not strident political positions.
- **Protecting the long-term health of the Colorado River**
Post-2026 operations must strengthen the River system by providing transparent, verifiable management of Lake Powell and Lake Mead, supporting water users and environmental values and providing stable reservoirs and resilient water supplies. Operating within the Law of the River is essential.

Real People: Shrinking water supply in the Upper Basin directly affects farmers, ranchers, tribes and rural communities. Many users already face uncompensated reductions in the headwaters, highlighting the human cost of shortages. Real People core principles include:

- **Supporting operations within the available supply**
The Upper Basin manages water based on real-time conditions. Post-2026 rules must recognize that reductions are already occurring and all water users must adapt to declining supplies.
- **Following the Law of the River and respecting state water rights**
Agreements must work within the legal framework. The Upper Basin has not used its full allocation and develops at its own pace. No state or water users should be immune from the Law of the River.
- **Advancing Tribal inclusion**



Tribal Nations are part of the Basin's past and future. Operations should support pathways for Tribes to derive benefits from settled Tribal water rights.

- **Providing clarity, transparency and predictability**

Clear triggers, accounting methods and communication protocols build trust and help users plan effectively.

Real Cuts: The Upper Basin already takes significant mandatory and uncompensated reductions, averaging about 1.3 million acre-feet per year, including pre-Compact water rights and historical uses, and meets its responsibilities without relying on multi-billion-dollar federal bailouts. While the Lower Basin has also reduced uses, releasing more water from reservoirs than flows into them is resulting in declining reservoir levels at Lake Powell (29%) and Lake Mead (32%). The core principles of Real Cuts include:

- **Maintaining Compact compliance in a science-driven way**

The Upper Division States comply with the Compact every year and will continue to do so, even as hydrologic conditions change. Use caps or mandatory reductions in the Upper Basin would unfairly penalize decades of responsible water management and preclude flexible tools. The Compact includes consideration of all supplies and uses across the Upper and Lower Basin and we expect compliance by all.

- **Sharing responsibility for reducing system risks**

All parts of the Basin must contribute. Lower Basin solutions must first address structural overuse and then adapt to the available supply, while Upper Basin conservation efforts offer scalable, locally supply-driven success within its management tools.

Real Actions: The Upper Basin is taking concrete steps to manage water responsibly. From alternative forage and crop-switching and innovative water exchanges in Colorado, to the Jicarilla Apache lease release in New Mexico, to municipal conservation in Wyoming, states are innovating across the region. Collaborative accounting projects in Utah, combined with thousands of new measurement devices and advanced consumptive-use methods, help ensure water is tracked and managed with precision. Real Actions core principles include:

- **Strengthening resilience through conservation and smart investments**

Efficiency, conservation and targeted infrastructure improvements help stabilize the system. The Upper Basin's supply-driven approach offers a proven path forward.

- **Keeping flexibility at the core of the operating framework**

The River is dynamic. Post-2026 operations must adapt as conditions evolve, ensuring a durable agreement for decades to come.

Real Solutions: The Upper Basin remains committed to sustainable operation of Lake Powell and Lake Mead, and collaboration with Lower Basin partners to develop a science-based operating framework built for an uncertain future. Leaning on the guiding principles above, the Upper Basin States are:

- Working to negotiate a 20-year operational plan for Lake Powell and Lake Mead (2027–2046).
- The parts of the plan include:
 - Powell operations aimed at sustaining Lake Powell



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- Mead operations that live within the means of the River
 - Lower Basin uses that adapt to available supply
 - Upper Division State's contributions framework that provide additional support to Lake Powell
 - Operation of CRSP Initial Units consistent with the purposes of those facilities supporting Upper Basin interests
 - Basin States Agreement
- The working framework must be a complete package, meaning no agreement is final until all parts are approved.
- Committed to negotiations to deliver a full package agreement to the Department of the Interior /Bureau of Reclamation by Feb. 14, 2026.

Commissioner Quotes:

UCRC Chair Becky Mitchell, Colorado's Commissioner to the UCRC

"There's an important difference between protecting lawful uses and asking the rest of the Basin to subsidize continued overuse. Rhetoric that treats emergency federal action or Upper Basin storage as a backstop for Lower Basin demand distorts both the Compact and the crisis. There's a growing gap between the political rhetoric we're hearing and the hydrologic reality we're living with. The Colorado River does not respond to press releases or historical entitlements — it responds to snowpack, soil moisture and temperature."

Estevan Lopez, New Mexico Commissioner to the UCRC

"The Upper Basin is part of the basin. There was a promise made 100 years ago under the 1922 Compact that we get to develop and use water from the basin as well. Right now, unfortunately, it seems like the only real focus is how can we get more water to the Lower Basin. The Lower Basin needs to have a sustainable water supply, no doubt about it - but they also need to look at their needs and allow us to live with the water we have."

Gene Shawcroft, Utah Commissioner to the UCRC

"Through various programs, we are learning real-time impacts, some impacts we didn't even know we would be confronted with. Even when we have agreements and positions in place for conserved consumptive use, if the water's not there, it can't be conserved. That's the reality of what we deal with. Programs in progress come at a price. They affect real people and real livelihoods and are significant for us and significant to those participating."

Brandon Gebhart, Wyoming Commissioner to the UCRC

"Wyoming didn't cause the problem, but we haven't escaped the impacts. We also can't escape the fact that we're connected to the bigger river system. Wyoming and the other Upper Basin States are fulfilling our commitments, and we are fully committed to being part of the solution. Suggestions to the contrary fail to recognize what's actually happening. There has been and continues to be an enormous amount of work in the Upper Basin to develop solutions to the problem we all face — hydrology."



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About the Upper Colorado River Commission (UCRC)

The UCRC is an interstate administrative agency made up of duly appointed representatives from the four Upper Division States — Colorado, New Mexico, Utah and Wyoming.

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